

The Doubt

BY LEILA BURTON WELLS

POVERTY! Culver, as he glanced around the small apartment in the moment vouchsafed him before his hostess should make her appearance, decided that it was that peculiarly opprobrious poverty which we by courtesy call genteel; every article in the room bore mute witness to the fact, seeming to shrink from the investigating eye with an almost human shame in the present and pride in the past.

The gray afternoon light revealed everywhere effort without completion; a straining for a pleasurable effect that displayed only too flagrantly the strength of the desire and the inadequacy of the means. If Culver had been asked to describe the little room he might truthfully have called it "a study in make-shifts." His brows contracted over his puzzled eyes. He had learned to quarrel with surprises; and those arbutus blooms tucked into a wide-necked bottle, around whose bulky and unlovely middle green tissue-paper had been wrapped, those rosy-faced harbingers of spring—surely his unknown hostess had not a predilection for anything so inoffensively simple? He smiled as the thought presented itself to his censorious consciousness; for he had drawn a mental picture of Mrs. Kessler, and he did not dream that she would in any way differ from his preconceived image. He had not even pictured her as a lady. The circumstances of the case precluded such a deduction, at least to his coldly legal mind. Pretty he had decided she probably would be, with that sort of cheap animal prettiness which befools and befuddles the most austere of men and is a tawdry extenuation for all reasonless extravagances. In thirty years of legal practice he had grown familiar with the type. It had a way of getting into court and dragging victims with it; Culver was always surprised at the number of the victims.

A woman's hand pushed aside the curtain that hung before the inner room, and with a half-satirical shrug of his shoulders he arose to his feet.

There was a moment of stunned silence; and then Mrs. Kessler came slowly forward. She was pale and very slender, and, like autumn sunlight, cold and sweet. Culver stared at her, fascinated. There was no warmth or color about her anywhere, unless it lay in her eyes, for her hair was ashen yellow, and sea foam could not have been whiter than the skin on her temples and brows. This whiteness was divided from the soft splendor of her eyes by arched black brows, and it was so intensified by the contrast that the oddity of her coloring (or lack of coloring) seemed at first the most salient and tangible thing about her. Later, one was struck by a certain separateness that seemed to exclude intimacy. Culver, a quick student of human nature, decided that she was cold and passionless; certainly calculating, and perhaps cruel. He took a step forward, and she advanced to meet him with a little gracious hesitancy in her manner, but no embarrassment or confusion, though she had evidently just come from the kitchen, and in deference to his presence had removed an apron. There was something so superbly well-bred about her every movement, that to imagine her as apologizing for any situation in which she might find herself was presumptuous.

"Mr. Culver?" she inquired, glancing, as she spoke, at a letter which she held in her hand, and which Culver recognized instantly as his own. "It is Mr. Culver, isn't it?"

As he bowed acquiescence, she added, simply, "I am Mrs. Kessler."

Again Culver bowed. If he had been flayed for it he could not have uttered a word. He was striving to adjust his startled faculties, and he did all things

thoroughly and without undue haste; so she had to repeat with a gentle reiteration: "I am Mrs. Kessler—Mrs. Dorr Kessler. Your letter was delayed. I have just finished reading it. . . . You say"—referring to the letter—"that you have a matter of importance to—"

"Er—certainly, certainly!" Culver interrupted her, rather incoherently, depositing himself on a chair and his hat and cane on the floor. "You informed me—" he began, and then, meeting her eyes, he stammered, halted, lost himself for a moment in unwilling admiration; staring almost rudely at her head, drooping a little under its burden of pale hair like a wistful Narcissus bloom—or was it a Narcissus—or—?

"You were saying—?"

"I was—er—saying," Culver brought out the words rather lamely—"I was saying that I had almost despaired of—er—ever finding you, Mrs. Kessler. My advertisement remained so long unanswered."

She smiled, twisting his letter between her fingers with a graceful indolence as if even the scrap of paper had its use, since it provided employment for her dainty fingers. "I very seldom read the 'Personal' columns in the papers," she told him, with a little explanatory note in her voice. "It was quite by chance that your notice attracted my attention—quite by chance."

"A very fortunate chance for you; if I may be permitted to say it," remarked Culver, smiling.

She lifted her brows inquiringly. "Fortunate?"

"Very fortunate," with careful emphasis. "I have here some papers"—extracting them from an inner pocket—"which will, I think—" He interrupted himself to glance up at her searchingly. "You have, I suppose, no idea why that advertisement was inserted in the *Herald*?"

She made a gesture of negation. "No."

"No faintest notion of my business?" "No!"

Culver smiled. He was conscious of a faint—very faint—sensation of pleasurable exhilaration at being brought face to face with something new and baffling. The woman before him was so utterly

and ludicrously unlike his imaged picture of her that his narrow, gray eyes rested on her face now with that searching penetration of regard that is embarrassing to those who have anything to conceal. Mrs. Kessler did not flinch; she did not stir restlessly; she did not move or fidget; but a slow color mounted to her pale cheeks as if in protest at his seeming rudeness.

"I don't think I quite understand—" she began, nervously.

"I beg your pardon." Culver opened one of the legal papers in his hand. "I will not keep you long in suspense. Pardon me if I ask a few necessary questions. Your maiden name, Mrs. Kessler, was, I believe, Hoff. Laura Kingsly Hoff?"

She leaned forward quickly as if to speak impulsively, but in the end contented herself with a simple inclination of her head.

"Laura Kingsly Hoff," Culver repeated, mechanically, without removing his eyes from the paper, "of Cleveland, Ohio—Cleveland was your home, I believe, Mrs. Kessler?"

"Yes, Cleveland was my home before my marriage; but I fail to see—"

"One moment! You left there six years ago?"

"About six years ago, yes; but—"

"Had you a friend there in Cleveland, Mrs. Kessler? A male friend; by name Franklyn Marbury?" He stooped, as he spoke, to return to her slender fingers the twisted letter that had at the moment of his question fluttered from her hand to the floor.

She flushed. "How stupid of me!" she murmured, apologetically. "Thank you. You were saying—?"

"I was asking if you knew a Mr. Marbury of Cleveland, Franklyn Marbury?"

For a moment she was silent, then she answered, very sweetly and simply. "Yes," she said; "Mr. Marbury was a friend of mine—as a girl."

"Ah!"

"It was a long time ago," smiling, "and I have not thought of—"

"Mr. Marbury is dead!" said Culver, slowly, watching her face.

"Dead!"

"He died very suddenly, of heart failure, while in California."

She stared at him incredulously.

Culver coughed. "I am sorry to bring—"

"Dead!" She shrank before him, drawing in her breath quickly in little uneven gasps; her face was whiter than a pearl—but then it had been white before. She closed her eyes with a quick instinct at concealment before Culver had caught or analyzed the expression that flamed under the dark lashes. He bent forward interestedly.

"You acknowledge Mr. Marbury as a friend," he began, quietly. "He has proved himself a very good one indeed. A life-insurance policy was found on his body, a hundred-thousand-dollar policy, drawn up in favor of—"

"Well?"

"You are the beneficiary, Mrs. Kessler."

"I—I don't think—I don't understand."

"It is absurdly simple—the only difficult thing was in unearthing you. Now, if you will allow me—"

"Wait—just a moment! Let me understand. You say that I—that he has left me a hundred thousand dollars? That he is dead, and has left me—"

Culver smiled. "That is the amount of the policy; yes." A slightly disagreeable expression contracted the corners of his mouth. She was showing emotion at last—over the money!

"A hundred thousand dollars!" she repeated the words automatically, her eyes unconsciously travelling around the poor little, mean little room, considering with an uncompromising eye the pitiful attempts to hide and conceal its sordid and hateful ugliness. And that hideous, brutal and soul-destroying ugliness had been for five years her daily bread! Tears blurred her vision, but Culver did not see them, for his eyes were following hers, and he was mentally admitting her adaptability, her peculiar adaptability, to spend her money both judiciously and artistically. His lids narrowed; and for a long moment there was silence in the room. Then Mrs. Kessler raised her hands rather dizzily to her head and brushed back the fall of soft hair from her temples. For a moment she was exalted, her very beauty changing, the wine-red color spilling itself into her pal-

lid cheeks until she no longer reminded Culver of a Narcissus bloom, but of a resplendent blood-red dahlia, all passion and pride. Then, as swiftly as it had come, the glow faded, and a little sigh escaped her, the sigh of one who has returned from a far and wonderful country, has seen radiant visions there, and solemnly and finally forsworn them one and all. She drooped in her chair as if very tired, and when her eyes met Culver's she smiled pitifully, almost as if she would seek even from him understanding and sympathy.

"It is a great deal of money," she whispered, faintly. "A hundred thousand dollars! It would tempt—almost any one; wouldn't it?"

The man smiled. "Undoubtedly! Fortunately for you, though, it does not come in the form of a temptation. His sisters—he has two sisters—will probably contest, but—"

Mrs. Kessler lifted her head suddenly. "It will not be necessary—"

Culver glanced swiftly at her face. "You said—?"

"That it would not be necessary. I will never touch a penny of that money!"

"But, my dear lady—"

"I will not touch it—now or ever!" clasping her hands tightly together in her lap.

"Good heavens!" Culver leaned back in his chair, and stared like one distraught at the still, white face. "My dear madam! Really! This is preposterous! Why, it is absurd! ridiculous! You cannot understand what you are saying—"

"Oh yes, I understand quite well what I am saying." Her lips quivered a little like a young child's. She regarded him piteously.

He permitted himself an impatient gesture. "But, my dear young lady, the money is yours by right. You are wronging yourself—your husband."

"Don't! Please don't!" She put out her hands passionately, and again an expression passed over her face that Culver was unable to analyze. He thought for a moment to term it exaltation, a sort of sacred exaltation, but, even as he looked, it shifted, and he was quite certain it was fear!

"My husband," her lips faltering over the words. "There is no necessity of

his knowing. I do not wish him to know of this—this—” stumbling over the words.

“But, my dear madam. I do not feel justified—”

She rose to her feet. “*You* do not feel justified!” and for the first time she reminded him of no flower, but a passionately proud woman. “The money was left to me, was it not?”

“It most certainly was.”

“Can the law force it upon me if I wish to decline it?”

“No; but—”

“Then if I *do* wish to decline it, the matter ends here, does it not? I want to understand.”

“It will be my duty, of course, to endeavor to make you realize—” Culver began.

Her large, clear eyes met his levelly. “I think your duty is at an end, Mr. Culver,” she said, calmly. “Thank you for coming—for all your trouble, but my decision is made.” She held out her hand. “I think when I ask you to let the matter rest here you will gratify me, will you not?” For a moment, or a century, as it seemed to Culver, he was absolutely hypnotized by the compelling power of her voice, her eyes, the touch of her slim, cool hand; then their fingers fell apart, and he bowed low before her.

“I am wholly and absolutely at your service,” he found himself saying, obediently. “I regret, of course, that you seem to feel the necessity of abandoning a fortune that comes to you so easily.” As he spoke the words a dull flush touched his face, recalling his preconceived ideas of the woman before him, his contemptuous tolerance, his doubts, his damaging conjectures. He had thought of her as tawdry and cheap; he had compared her mentally to—

He stooped to pick up his hat and cane, ashamed of these thoughts in the face of the sweet candor of her gaze. “I cannot help regretting,” he repeated, as he found his way toward the door, “your decision. I feel that you are wronging yourself. You are young, my dear lady, and, pardon me if I say it, scarcely capable of judging calmly. Now, your husband—”

She started and shrank as if from a blow. “You have *promised* me!” she

cried, passionately, and her voice was like discordant music.

“Promised?” He lifted his brows questioningly.

“That this matter should end here.” Her eyes were on his.

Again he bowed, shrugging his shoulders. “As you wish, only— You have my card if you should change your mind.”

She shook her head. “I will not change my mind; thank you, just the same.”

He paused with his hand on the door. “Your sex has been known—” He interrupted himself suddenly, his glance arrested by a drawing in sepia on the wall. “I beg your pardon,” feeling for his glasses. “May I be permitted?” He advanced toward the picture.

“It is a portrait of me by my husband,” she explained, simply. “It was done before our marriage. I will lift the shade so you can get a better light.”

Culver adjusted his glasses carefully and then started perceptibly. It was as she had said, “a portrait,” in the best sense of the word. The treatment was simple, and the composition, the atmosphere, the technique, were not wholly flawless; but above and beyond all these, and quickly to be discerned, was that magical something which is not to be learned, which vivifies all that it touches, and is called genius.

Culver regarded the picture for a moment in silence. “Your husband,” he stammered, “did you say?”

“It is one of his earliest sketches, yes.” A little bitter smile touched her lips. “You are probably unfamiliar with his work. He is unrecognized, as yet—as yet—” Tears were in her voice.

“God bless my soul!” Culver stared from the drawing on the wall to the face of the woman at his side. “A genius. My dear madam! And he is buried in this—in *this*—”

“Yes,” she said, proudly. “Yes, he is buried—here! We are poor—very poor—but poverty is not the worst thing,” defensively.

Culver coughed. “No, oh no; of course not! No, indeed!” His eyes again took in the small bare room with the woman standing like a streak of sunlight in the centre of it. “There are, as you

say, worse things—but I am sorry! Decision still the same? A hundred thousand, remember!”

She smiled bravely. “Quite the same; good-by!” holding out her hand again.

“Good-by. Remember you have my card.”

“I shall not need it. Thank you. Be careful, the stairs are dark. Wait an instant, and I will light the gas in the hall.” As she spoke she struck a match and a small flicker of light lit up the darkened landing. Culver turned as he reached the last stair to carry with him the picture of a rare white face that reminded him insistently of all fragrant flowers, yet was comparable to none of them; of two wistful dark eyes that promised an intangible something he had never known. For a moment he stood watching her in silence, then bowing reverently he laid his hand on the door-knob and passed out.

As the door closed upon him at last the woman in the upper hall sighed as if with extreme weariness, and reaching up a slender arm, turned out the gas-jet. Then she groped her way into the inner room, touching first one article then the other with listless hands, straightening a chair here, pushing a footstool over a worn place in the carpet there; trying to feel as if nothing had been altered, as if all were the same.

A cold twilight lay over the little room and it looked unspeakably mean. She had not known before how mean. How cheap everything was and ugly. How that ugliness must offend—others! She had grown a little callous to it perhaps; but Dorr—oh, it must jar him every minute in the day! And it was something they could not escape. They had to live with it, eat and drink it, as it were, and now the temptation of this money. It was hard to abandon it, hard, hard! She found herself considering ways and means. . . . If it could only be taken without his knowledge. But she thrust that thought from her almost violently as unworthy. They were no poorer than they had been before. They were happy! Even if they starved they had each other. They were happy. And dared she, for mere bodily luxury, experiment with that happiness? Ah, she knew him too well to take the risk. She

knew him too well to put him to the test. She shivered as she thought of the consequences of his *knowing*. She sighed heavily, and began taking the articles from the little centre-table. There was so pitifully little for supper that the effort was spiritless—and he would be weary and hungry. A hundred thousand dollars! It was a temptation. The lawyer had spoken of it as coming easily, yet it had come in the one impossible way. . . .

There was a heavy dragging step on the stair, and she paused with the table-cover suspended in her hands to listen, and as she listened her face changed, and over it spread a light that was neither of earth nor yet of heaven, a warm illuminating glow that burned all the coldness out of her beauty and left it rosy and pulsating. The table-cloth slipped from her fingers, and she flew to the door, her skirts fluttering against her fleeing feet.

“Wait a moment!” she called, her voice all sunshiny with welcome. “I will light the gas. Just a minute. . . .”

“Don’t bother,” said the man, who was slowly ascending the stairs. “It isn’t necessary. I can see well enough.” She shivered a little at his tone and reached out for him in the darkness as she stood on the landing above him—reached out with that abandonment of giving that makes even an idle moment with some women a supreme and ineffable ecstasy.

The man’s arms closed around her with a sudden and selfish instinct of possession. “I have *you* anyway,” he breathed, defiantly, his words crushed against her ready lips. “What does anything else matter? I have you.”

Her answer was a little sighing sob that was half triumph, half exaltation. “You have me always,” she sighed; “but am I enough? Am I all, all? Say it this minute. Am I *all*?”

The man laughed and shook her a little as he held her in his arms. “I will not be dictated to.”

Her hands reached up for his face and drew it down, down—holding it close against her own. “Say it! Say it!”

“Never. You would use it against me in other days.”

“Say it!” In the darkness the flame

in her eyes leaped to his. He snatched her suddenly back to him, close, closer yet. Heart to heart they stood for one immortal moment. And there was nothing withheld; soul and body blent in a white flame of such sacred purity, such passionate fulfilment, that the inner heart of things was laid bare, and for an instant they touched together the real and eternal entity of love. Then the woman sagged a little in his straining arms. "Nothing matters except love," she almost sobbed, hiding her face against him. "Tell me that nothing else matters—to you?"

"What a child you are!" He drew her out of the darkness into the inner room. "We will be obliged to say that presently in grim earnest. It will be our only possession." He flung a portfolio impatiently on a waiting chair, and began to tear off his overcoat. His face was pale and strained-looking.

"Is it bad news?" she asked, her caressing hands communicating a subtle sympathy.

He shrugged his shoulders. "The worst! They have returned all the drawings. Say I'm not fit to do illustrating."

"Dorr!"

"The same old story, I must go abroad and study. I am a genius—undoubtedly a genius!" he repeated bitterly, "but my work is yet too extraordinary to sell. I must take up portraiture. Must try a new field—unquestionably the power is there, but—bah!" He flung himself into a chair and dropped his head on his hands. "And there is more to come," he groaned, despairingly.

"What more?"

"We must give up these rooms."

"Why?" calmly.

"The rent has been raised. A bigger offer, I suppose. I am a failure, every way you look at it; I can't even earn bread."

"Don't, dear; oh, *don't*!" Her hands were on his shoulders, about his neck, in an instant. "Things have been hard before and we have weathered the gale. What if we must leave here? Really, I have often thought two rooms too much for me to take care of; now one—"

"It may not even be one."

She laughed. "Well, at any rate there

are the benches in the park. They can't take those from us!"

"No." He arose to his feet almost violently. "I am going to give up *this*!" He snatched the portfolio from the chair and flung it on the table. "I am going to get work—any kind of work—I am strong, I am young. It is *this* that has ruined me; burned me up, eaten me up, body and soul; and you with me. No, don't say a word." He pushed her almost harshly from him, his eyes aflame, a hectic spot burning in his cheeks. "What is there any one can say?"

"Much." Her quiet hands touched him soothingly, as one might touch a child. "This has burnt you up, you say," touching the portfolio. "Will it burn any the less for putting it away? Oh, my dearest, you know you cannot put it away! It is you—your life! Don't despair because the blind can't see. In time they will know your work for what it is worth."

"And until then we must starve," bitterly.

"No, not starve! We can take cheaper rooms. A woman down-stairs has promised me some sewing, and you can work on those advertisements. . . ."

"Advertisements!" The man tore himself from her clinging hands. "Oh, God," he groaned, aloud, "for money! Just a little common, sordid money!"

She shrank at his word as if flesh had been torn from her naked hand; started, but did not flinch. "Money," she repeated, faintly.

"Just enough money to help me to prove what I can do! To take you and go there where I can sit, as it were, at the feet of Art and learn like a little child—just enough to keep the wolf from the door until I have *expressed*. . . . Oh, my God! to have been denied expression; that is the thought that kills. To have to sell your soul for the lack of a little yellow gold."

The woman lifted her tortured eyes to his face and shivered. She saw her sacrifice approaching, and hated it! She knew him so well that, woman-like, she temporized, delaying the ultimate pang.

"Dorr," she said, quietly, and for a moment she was the cool, sweet, emotionless woman Culver had marvelled over

earlier in the day. Kessler turned to her, arrested by something unusual in her voice.

"Dorr," she repeated, stretching out her beautiful hands and drawing him to her, "answer me a question. Look at me, into my eyes. No, don't kiss me. I want you to tell me quietly and calmly what you would sacrifice, if anything, to keep our love what it is to-day; flawless? Please try to understand what I mean—just what I mean. For instance—I would be quite willing to go with you to some desert place where no man's voice could penetrate, with only the earth below us and the sky above; to live there day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute. To live there with you in loneliness and privation; *just with you!* Not for a week, remember, or for a month, but for as long as breath lasted in my body—"

"And do you think that I—" he began, passionately.

"No; wait, dear; don't answer yet. You have never told me a lie, and I don't want you to now. You know what our life together has been. We have been poor, but the perfection of our love has remained always with us. A breath has never come between; we have walked hand in hand, heart in heart, for five years—as one. We have known the height and depth and breadth of human passion. There has been nothing lacking—"

"Do you need to tell me this?"

"Yes, I need to tell you, for you have to choose! The perfection of that love on one side, and your art and all the world on the other. It is a hard choice for you. . . . Supposing, dear," she held down his impatient hands that were reaching out to clasp her—"supposing that you could have enough money to go abroad—to study—to develop your genius—supposing that in a minute, without lifting your hand, you could leave all this behind," glancing at the destitute little room, "that you could have all that your soul most craves, but that our love must pay the price—"

"You mean that I must lose *you*?" The whirlwind of his arms engulfed her.

"Not me—but the essence of our love." The man laughed. "Give me the money and I'll keep the essence," he cried, gayly.

She shrank from him. "Hush! Oh, wait! You don't understand—you can't know—"

"I know that I am hungry, madam, and that I see no preparation for supper."

"Oh, don't you realize that I am serious? Answer me one question; just one. Does our love mean more to you than all else—than Art even?"

"What's the use of hair-splitting?" evasively.

She gave a low cry and covered her face. No more words were necessary. She read his answer in his eyes, and she resisted with despairing strength when he tried to draw her hands from her face.

"What is the matter with you, child? I don't understand you. What do you mean?"

Then she let her hands drop and faced him.

"I mean that I will have to sell my happiness because, without knowing it, you demand it of me. Because you would hate me if I stood between you and success; because you would sacrifice love to it, and I must too!"

"You are talking insanely."

She shook her head sadly, her eyes fixed on the face bent above hers. "Oh no, insanity does not analyze; madness does not weigh the cost; madness does not think and understand; that is my curse—that I know so well. For telling you what I tell you now I must pay all the rest of my life. I am offering up our love as a sacrifice."

"What in Heaven's name do you mean?" There was a note of spent impatience in his voice, and she shrank before it, covering her face again with her hands as if to shut out something intolerable. "I am afraid to tell you," she moaned, "because I know you so well. Oh, my beloved, if you were a different man I would not fear."

"Different in what way?" he demanded, quickly, his self-love pricked by her tone.

She sighed. "I can't explain; but I can tell you the truth. There is no use in hiding it; no use in trying to protect myself. You spoke a moment since of money. It is yours if you want it."

The man smiled sarcastically and shrugged his shoulders. "Is this a joke?"

She shook her head, explaining, patiently: "No, it is the truth. The lawyer has just gone. A man in Cleveland—a friend of mine before my marriage, has left me—he died suddenly in California—has left me a hundred thousand dollars—"

"What!"

"Yes, it seems absurd, doesn't it? But it is true. A life-insurance policy was found on his body. The lawyer—"

"Great heavens! Laura!" The hot blood rushed to the man's face. "You must be joking! Let me look at you," putting a hand on either arm and turning her toward him. "If it were true why did you not tell me when I first came in? Why did you not tell me—"

She gently unfastened his hands from her arm. "I had a reason for that. I thought— Well, never mind what I thought. You have the truth—the money is ours!"

"A hundred thousand dollars!" the man repeated, dizzily.

"Yes, that was what the lawyer said." She shivered.

"Laura," he snatched her to him suddenly, "why are you so cold and still? Aren't you glad? Don't you know what this means?"

She stirred in his arms, and her eyes dropped before his. "Yes," she said, mechanically, "I know what it means—that we can go abroad—that you can study—that recognition will come—that we will leave this—" with a little wan glance around the small room.

She felt his heart pound under hers, and she saw the flame of exaltation sweep to his face. He staggered away from her.

"Good God!"

She stared at him curiously. "Does it mean so much to you?" she asked, in a whisper.

"It means *life*!" Again he caught her in his arms. "Beloved, beloved! You shall see—ah, how I will paint! How I will paint! And I had thought that I would have to put my brushes away. Look up, Laura! Why, what is the matter with you? Don't you *want* this money?"

"Yes, I want it."

"Then what—"

"Nothing; I am glad if you are glad." The man loosed her from his arms and

paced the floor excitedly. "Why," he stammered, "it is wonderful—miraculous! It is like a fairy-tale, a dream—a hundred thousand dollars, and a relative left it to you, you say?"

"No, not a relative—a friend."

"A friend?" He paused, puzzled. "You have never mentioned a friend in Cleveland to me!"

The woman raised eyes that were like the eyes of an animal that sees punishment before it, and cringes, yet dares not flee. She was very pale and dropped into a chair by the table as if she had no longer the strength to stand upright. She clasped her hands together in her lap, one supporting the other, then she spoke.

"No, I never mentioned it!" she said.

"That seems odd!"

She shook her head. "I never thought of it—that way. You know you never asked me much of my life."

"That is true, too. That is very true." He regarded her fixedly. "Yes," he repeated, "that is true; and this man—what is his name? I don't think you have told me?"

"Marbury. Franklyn Marbury."

"What sort of a man is he? . . . Was he, I mean? What reason had he for leaving you this fortune?"

The woman clenched her hands yet a little tighter in her lap. "He was about like other men; I don't know why he left me the money; unless—unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless he was fond of me."

"Fond of you?" in a terrible voice.

With a sudden desperate cry the woman flung out her hands as if to ward off a blow. "It is coming," she moaned, aloud, "and, oh, it is too hard to bear, too hard to bear!"

The man reached out and caught one of her hands in his, dragging her to her feet. "What is too hard to bear? What is coming? Why do you look that way? Act that way? As if—as if—my God, you were a guilty woman!"

"Go on!" She raised herself to her full height and stared in his face. "I know you! I am expecting it!"

"I will go on! I demand an explanation of this thing. This man—this friend—was he perhaps old?"

"No, he was not old."

"He was not old! That is strange,

too. An old man might leave a fortune to a young and beautiful woman through friendship; but—

"Go on."

"But this man!—I think I must be losing my reason. These horrible thoughts! Laura, don't stand there like a stone! Are you going to drive me mad? Explain to me. I don't understand—this man—what was he to you that you never dared mention his name to your husband? What was he to you, this *friend* who leaves you a hundred thousand dollars? Aren't you going to speak? Answer me! Aren't you going to speak?"

"He was a man who loved me."

Face to face, eye to eye, they stood staring into each other's soul. When he spoke there was something in his voice that she quailed before. "He loved you! And what does that statement mean, may I ask?"

"Simply that—that he loved me. Oh, *don't*."

His contemptuous laugh cut her like a lash. "And do men leave fortunes, large fortunes, to married women whom they have *just loved*?" He flung her hands from him as he would fling something unclean, but she imprisoned his arm desperately, pridelessly.

"Wait, Dorr, wait!" she cried, her voice strident with suffering. "Don't say anything you will regret! Remember, oh, my *dear*, remember it is your wife you are speaking to. For five long years my mind, my heart, my soul, my body, have been wholly and absolutely yours, and now—now at the first breath you— Oh, I can't think of it. I can't face it! I knew you would not believe; that you would not understand, but—but—"

"You knew that I would not understand? You were afraid, then, of your husband's judgment?"

"Not afraid of your judgment, afraid of your *suspicions*; your jealous suspicions! Do you suppose in all these years it has cost me nothing to protect myself against a nature that would almost doubt the sanctity of a shrine? Do you suppose I have not known, have not realized, just what you have demanded of me? You have not known—but I? Why, when that man came and told me

of this money, before I thought, the blood leaped to my face, my heart. It meant salvation to you—a fulfilment of all your dearest hopes—and for a moment I was sick with joy! Then, in a flash (how short our moments of ecstasy are!) I saw how it would *look* to you—in your eyes. That has been my life, to decide how things would look in *your* eyes, and protect myself against your suspicions! Well, as I say, I saw at once how it would appear to you—to any one perhaps—but especially to you . . . who lack faith and demand always proof. And I have no proof of any statement I might make. The man is dead; and you, as you so quickly remembered, know little of my past life. What little you do know is open and aboveboard, but that does not count. I concealed nothing. I was poor and dependent, but you loved me, and until now I have never given you a chance to question—and I would have cast this money away without a thought. I *did* refuse it unequivocally; but when I saw later, when I realized what it *meant* to you, I hadn't the courage to defraud you. Even to protect our love—for love is not all to you, but, oh, my dear, it is all, all, all of life! There is nothing else worth while. Nothing that can satisfy, nothing that can supply. . . . You don't know, but I know, and that makes what I am doing all the more hideous. But it is because of that very love that love wouldn't be love if it did not sacrifice itself. . . . Because of that love—"

"Laura!" the man dragged her to the window where the waning light, cold and merciless, strayed through the pane. "Now!" he cried, his face convulsed, "now, as before God, look in my face and tell me the truth."

"Would you believe me if I told it?"

"Tell me the truth and pray God that our love may be taken from us if you lie. Oh, my God, that I have to ask it! Are you—have you . . ."

She lifted her hands and put them on his shoulders and answered the fearful question in his eyes with the sweet serenity of her own. "I am a pure woman," she said, whisperingly. "That man was no more to me than a man who loved me, and whom I did not love. That

is the truth, so help me God! *Can you believe it?*"

For one crucifying moment they stared into each other's eyes, and the man, mad, tortured, studied every lineament of that exquisitely chiselled face that had flamed into passion always at his approach. Everything about her, each sweet and separate beauty, spoke to him of a love that dwarfed all other emotions, that engulfed life itself.

"You believe?" she cried, exultantly, incredulously. "You *can* believe?"

"What does it matter whether I believe or not? What does anything matter except this—and this—and *this!*"

He caught her in his arms with reckless strength, crushing her to him, pushing her head back almost cruelly, putting his lips to hers.

For a pulse's beat they stayed so—closely prisoned as in the past; then a little shiver shook the woman's form. . . . She tried to push him away.

"What is it?" demanded the man, fiercely, as she futilely struggled to free herself.

"Nothing. Only it isn't the same!"

"What isn't the same?" passionately crushing her to him again, as if to defend himself against the listlessness in her body. "Don't you love me?"

"Yes, I love you!"

"Don't *I* love you?"

"Yes, you love me."

"Then in God's name what is the matter?"

She shivered under the almost angry passion in his voice. "Let me go," she besought, faintly.

"No! Answer me!"

Her face grew very white. "There is nothing to say," in a spent whisper, "except that we have killed it between us. I have sold and you have bought it—our love."

"What do you mean?" shaking her roughly.

"Don't. You hurt me! I mean that nothing can be the same; no matter how long we live. There is no use talking; no use struggling. It is there, between us; and we can't escape it! There between us, in your eyes—your voice—your heart—the doubt! The *doubt!*" And as if she no longer had the will or desire to hold herself upright, she slipped through his arms and lay on the floor at his feet.

As she fell a white paper fluttered from her hand, and Kessler, with a swift and unpremeditated instinct of suspicion, caught it up and tore it feverishly open.

It was only Culver's letter "requesting an interview to impart a matter of vast personal importance."